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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

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STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE
OF CHINESE COMMUNIST ROAD DEVELOPMENT
IN YUNNAN PROVINCE
1954

CIA/RR IM-408

28 February 1955

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FOREWORD

The general purpose of this memorandum is to indicate the significance of Communist China's enhanced transport capability in southwest Yunnan by revealing the increasing vulnerability of neighboring Laos, Burma, and Thailand to Communist penetration.

This memorandum has been coordinated within CIA, but not with other IAC agencies.

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CIA/RR IM-408
(ORR Project 43.627A)

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STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE
OF CHINESE COMMUNIST ROAD DEVELOPMENT
IN YUNNAN PROVINCE*
1954

Summary

The Chinese Communists have made substantial progress toward the development of an effective road network in southern Yunnan Province. This network will facilitate the internal economic development and administrative control of the area by the Chinese Communists. The number and alignment of new or improved roads radiating from K'un-ming toward the neighboring countries of Burma, Thailand, and Indochina suggest that this network also will play an important part in Communist China's efforts to increase its influence in southeastern Asia.

1. Extent of Road Development in Yunnan.

The scope of the Yunnan road program and its importance in Chinese Communist planning is indicated by several announcements made during 1954 in the Chinese press. According to one such announcement the road network of Yunnan was expanded by about 50 percent during 1953 alone. The construction in 1953 of 12 new highways totaling 1,215 miles brought Yunnan's aggregate road network to 3,535 miles, and 860 more miles of roadways were improved or repaired. 1/** Moreover, road construction apparently is to continue in Yunnan and adjacent provinces, inasmuch as another press release indicates that, in addition to actual construction, 13 new highways were surveyed in Southwest China during 1953. 2/ It is particularly noteworthy that

* The estimates and conclusions contained in this memorandum represent the best judgment of ORR as of 9 January 1955.

** Footnote references in arabic numerals are to sources listed in Appendix B.

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more than one-fifth of the total amount expended by the central government in 1953 for highway construction was spent on the road network of Yunnan. 3/ The allocation to one province of such a large proportion of the total effort is a significant indication of Yunnan's importance in Chinese Communist planning.

The completion of new construction and the improvements undertaken during the past several years (which reportedly are being carried out to some extent with the advice of Soviet military and technical representatives 4/) will provide the Chinese Communists with four principal through routes from K'un-ming to the Burmese and Indochinese borders, as well as a substantial number of alternate roads to the frontiers which branch off from the through routes in the border areas. The westernmost of these through routes is the Burma Road,* which leads west from K'un-ming and then southwest to the Burmese border. Two, possibly three, new or improved roads branch off from the Burma Road in western Yunnan and extend to the Burmese frontier north of the Burma Road, where they connect with Burmese routes leading to the Ledo Road and the navigable Irrawaddy River. A second through route to the border area roughly parallels the Burma Road to the south to connect with a Burmese route to Lashio, the northern terminus of a rail line from Mandalay.

The third through route, to which the Chinese Communists apparently have devoted a sizable effort, extends from K'un-ming southwest to Ta-lo on the Burmese border, where it is linked by a Burmese road to the road networks of both Burma and Thailand. As in the case of the Burma Road, several alternate routes to the frontier branch off on both sides of the main route in the border area, in this case providing alternate routes both to Burma and Indochina and through them to Thailand. Further east, another principal road axis leads south from K'un-ming to the Indochinese border, following the general route of the former K'un-ming - Hanoi - Haiphong rail line. Beyond the Chinese railhead at Meng-tzu, there reportedly are two road routes available to northwest Tonkin, both of which have been used to transport Chinese aid to the Viet Minh.

* See the map, inside back cover.

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In addition to this pattern of through routes to the frontier, each with alternate roads in the border area, there exists (or is under construction) a series of lateral roads interconnecting the principal transport axes and towns in the area. These lateral routes roughly parallel the Chinese border at various distances within Chinese territory.

A detailed description of the new and improved roads under construction is contained in Appendix A. It should be noted here, however, that much of this information originated with untested sources and cannot be evaluated in detail. Nevertheless, the number and diversity of these reports, together with the claims which the Chinese Communists themselves have made concerning the progress of highway construction in Yunnan, clearly indicate that a sizable road development program has been under way in southern China for some time.

II. Significance of Road Development in Yunnan.

For purely internal reasons, it is probably an objective of some importance to the Chinese Communists to establish an extensive road network in southern Yunnan, an area which previously had only primitive communications and which has never been fully integrated with the rest of China. Such a network presumably will facilitate the diffusion of Communist ideology and permit a more effective central political and administrative control of this border region and its large non-Chinese tribal population. An improved transport network in the area also is essential to any appreciable local economic expansion and to the integration of Yunnan's economy with the national economy. Internal economic considerations apparently are not paramount, however, because, although Yunnan is rich in mineral resources, 5/ the principal new roads have been extended beyond the major areas of current mineral exploitation in the central and eastern portions of the province into regions which are, in general, sparsely populated agricultural districts. 6/ Despite the internal considerations which might justify the expanded road network and regardless of the actual motivation for its construction, the network is of considerable strategic significance because it materially increases Chinese Communist capabilities for further economic, political, and military penetration across China's borders into Southeast Asia.

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A. Economic.

The roads linking Communist China with the transport systems of its southern neighbors provide a means of commercial penetration, since they afford land routes for increasing trade with these countries, especially Burma. Although there is little immediate prospect of substantial volumes of trade passing over the roads, there is some indication that Burma constitutes a current economic target of Communist China. On 3 November 1954 a trade protocol was signed by Burma and Communist China in implementation of their trade agreement of April 1954, and, at the same time, a contract was signed for the purchase of 150,000 metric tons of Burmese rice by Communist China, thus alleviating by about 25 percent the unsold surplus in Burma. ^{7/} Subsequently, U Nu, Burma's Prime Minister, publicly announced that Chinese terms under the contract exceeded Burmese expectations. ^{8/} This statement implies that important concessions were made by Communist China during the negotiations, reflecting China's desire, for political reasons, to expand trade between the two countries in the hope of orienting Burma's trade toward the Communist bloc. The willingness of the Chinese Communists, who are major rice exporters, to buy a considerable quantity of Burmese rice is in itself a notable concession, since the rice may have to be re-exported at a loss. It is also possible that it reflects at least in part the effects of the recent floods in Communist China or a Chinese intention to ship rice to the Viet Minh to alleviate famine conditions in North Vietnam. In any event, the conclusion of the 3 November trade protocol with Burma probably constitutes a significant step in Chinese efforts to extend Communist influence in Southeast Asia.

It is noteworthy that the trade protocol included an agreement to expand overland trade between the two countries, ^{9/} thus affording the Chinese Communists access to northeastern Burma, an area in which China is already attempting to increase its influence. It might also be noted that the establishment of improved land transport connections with Burma will provide the Chinese Communists with access to certain critical raw materials such as rubber by way of lines of communication which would not be subject to a naval blockade.

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B. Military-Political.

The improvement of roads leading to the border of Communist China obviously increases Chinese capabilities for direct military action against Burma, Thailand, and Laos, particularly since the Chinese roads will now connect directly or indirectly with the transport networks of these countries. Of more immediate significance, however, is the potential use of these roads for the development and support from secure Chinese base areas of insurgent groups operating in and across the border area. This situation would be similar to the general pattern which prevailed in Indochina where Chinese Communist military and logistic support across the frontier roads made possible the development of Viet Minh guerrilla units into a comparatively well-armed fighting force and was a major factor in the French defeat and subsequent partition of Vietnam.

1. Thailand.

Communist-sponsored nationalist movements of varying degrees of organization and strength now exist as potential threats to the established governments of all three neighboring countries south of Yunnan. One potential threat to Thailand emanates from the Thai Autonomous Area, which was activated during 1953 in Communist China in the area of Ch'e-li, on the new K'un-ming - Ta-lo road. Although the establishment of the Thai Autonomous Area was only one of a number of similar actions which will increase Chinese administrative control over essentially non-Chinese people in remote areas, it nevertheless may foreshadow a future Chinese Communist effort to create a greater Thai state embracing all people of Thai stock, possibly also including ethnically related groups in Laos and Burma. 10/

Meanwhile, Pridi Phanomyong, a former Thai premier associated with the Free Thai movement, recently emerged under Chinese Communist sponsorship in Peking after prolonged concealment to urge rebellion in Thailand. 11/ Little is known concerning Pridi's activities, but it has been reported that he has subsequently established headquarters in the Ch'e-li area in southern Yunnan, where he is said to be recruiting and arming with Chinese assistance several thousand members of the Thai people in the Yunnan border area to "liberate" at least northern Thailand. 12/ His success to date is uncertain, but [REDACTED] the present popular dissatisfaction with the central Thai government would make the people

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of northern Thailand receptive to a Free Thai movement. 13/ Although there is no firm evidence linking the reported activities of Pridi with the establishment of the Thai Autonomous Area, they both represent externally sponsored means of applying increased pressure on the present Thai government, if given substantial Chinese Communist support in the future.

2. Laos.

The Viet Minh, backed by Chinese Communist military aid, have continued since the Indochina cease-fire to recruit, arm, and train a force of indigenous Laotians for the Pathet Lao movement. As early as August 1954, the French complained to the International Commission supervising the Indochina truce that the Viet Minh were transferring arms to Pathet Lao forces in violation of the Geneva agreement. 14/ In the following month the Laotian government accused the Viet Minh of recruiting some 3,000 men for training and political indoctrination since the cease-fire. 15/ Moreover, [REDACTED]

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25X1X6 [REDACTED] the Viet Minh continued as late as January 1955 to transport materiel, including weapons and uniforms, to the Pathet Lao regroupment areas in northern Laos. 16/ This is a clear indication of a Communist intention to control ultimately the kingdom of Laos.

Any extension of Communist control into Laos would further increase the Communist threat to Thailand. The threat stems not only from the advantageous geographic position of Laos but also from the presence of more than 5 million ethnic Laotians in northeast Thailand and large groups of Thai people in northern Laos. This intermingling of ethnic groups in the trans-Mekong area provides a potential means for Communist infiltration of Thailand from Laotian territory. That the Communists may attempt to exploit the ethnic affinity of these groups [REDACTED]

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25X1X7S [REDACTED] which indicates that a Thai Liberation Committee has already been established by a former close associate of Pridi's in northern Laos, in one of the provinces specified by the Geneva truce agreement as a regroupment area for the Pathet Lao military forces. 17/

3. Burma.

In Burma, meanwhile, where various dissident indigenous forces, both Communist and non-Communist, have long been active, there is also a threat of increased Communist pressure. Chinese Communist

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agents in northern Burma, which is only loosely administered by the Burmese government, have for some time been attempting to win the adherence and sympathy of local tribespeople and minority groups and to capitalize on existing frictions between these groups and the central government. The Chinese Communists, for example, reportedly have distributed cloth, salt, and other products to the local inhabitants and are alleged recently to have offered assistance to the villagers of one area in dealing with their agricultural problems. 18/ Chinese Communist troops are said to make occasional forays across the border and reportedly occupy several Burmese border towns, evidently with the sanction of local tribal authorities. 19/ Large areas of the Kachin and Wa States, in fact, have been disputed territory for many years and are shown on recent Chinese Communist administrative maps as part of China, which may be reason to expect further Chinese incursions into northern Burma in the future.

Chinese Communist control of sizable areas of northern Burma could greatly facilitate the growth of Burmese Communist rebel forces, whose influence heretofore has been largely confined to the central part of the country. It could prompt the Burmese Communist Party to establish a secure northern base area along the Chinese border, where close contact could be maintained with the Chinese Communists to facilitate the acquisition of both political and military aid. There is, in fact, some evidence that substantial arms aid has already been promised by the Chinese Communists, although there is no indication as yet that appreciable quantities of arms or ammunition have actually been supplied to the Burmese. 20/

III. Conclusions.

Whether or not the Communists have any immediate plans for increased military or paramilitary activity in Southeast Asia, the existence of an improved road network in Yunnan will clearly enhance Communist China's long-range capabilities to extend its political and economic influence to the south as well as to support logistically from a secure Chinese Communist base area the various indigenous insurgent groups in the region.

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APPENDIX A

DETAILS OF ROAD CONSTRUCTION AND IMPROVEMENT
IN YUNNAN

The Chinese Communist press has announced that 12 new highways totaling 1,215 miles were constructed in Yunnan in 1953, bringing Yunnan's aggregate highway network to 3,535 miles, and 860 more miles of roadways were improved or repaired. 21/ In addition to actual construction, 13 new highways were surveyed during 1953. 22/

The completion of the roads under construction will provide the Chinese Communists with four principal through routes from K'un-ming to the Burmese and Indochinese borders, as well as a number of alternate roads to the frontier which branch off from the through routes near the border. In addition to the recently repaired Burma Road, 23/ which has been in service for some time, there are 3 new motor roads known to be open or under construction and reportedly at least 2 other routes being built toward the Chinese-Burmese frontier. Perhaps the most important new road extension, the K'un-ming - Ta-lo route, is now nearing completion. This road, which leads from K'un-ming southwest through Yuan-chiang, Ssu-mao, and Ch'e-li to connect with the road networks of Burma and Thailand by way of the partly motorable 24/ Burmese road to Keng-tung, was announced by the Chinese Communists in June 1954 to be open as far as Fo-hai and was reported elsewhere to have reached Ta-lo on the Burmese border. 25/

Although Chinese Communist press announcements refer to Ta-lo as the terminus of the new road, there is some evidence that a further extension southward is under construction in Burmese territory. Two reports, dated November 1953 and January 1954, referred to work on the Burmese section of the road, although the exact location was not specified. 26/

In November 1953, large-scale construction was reported under way between Ta-ya-k'ou, a ferry point on the Mekong River, and Meng-lien, suggesting the establishment of a new route between Ssu-mao on the K'un-ming - Ta-lo road and Meng-ma, a Chinese border town on a second route leading to Keng-tung, Burma. At the same time, another road was being built east from Meng-lien to Meng-man

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for military transport, indicating an eventual connection to the K'un-ming - Ta-lo route at Fo-hai. 27/ Completion of construction on these two roads would provide an alternate means of access from Ssu-mao on the new K'un-ming - Ta-lo route to the Chinese frontier area, with a lateral connection just inside the Yunnan border.

Construction probably is nearing completion on two other Chinese routes leading across Yunnan to the Burmese border, where they will connect with Burmese routes to the Ledo Road. Each of the new Chinese roads begins at T'eng-ch'ung (which is in turn connected to the Burma Road by two routes). One, under construction in May 1953, follows an old road leading northwestward toward the Ledo Road at Myitkyina, 28/ which is also the northern terminus of a Burmese rail line from Rangoon and Mandalay. The second, completed as far as Man-chang-kai by the end of 1953 and now considered to be open, runs southwestward toward the Ledo Road at Bhamo, 29/ on the navigable Irrawaddy River. Moreover, in the fall of 1953, according to an unconfirmed report, the Chinese began surveying a road south from T'eng-ch'ung to Muse, 30/ just inside Burmese territory. The reported alignment of this road indicates that it would roughly parallel the Burma Road to the frontier. 31/

Another trans-Yunnan road will parallel the Burma Road to the southwest, running close to the old Mi-tu - Lashio railroad. Reportedly under construction by 100,000 civilian laborers in March 1952, the new road will lead southwest from Hsiang-yün through Nan-chien and Yun-hsien, by Mien-ning, and through Keng-ma and Meng-ting to Kunlong inside the Burmese border. 32/ Apparently it was being laid on a previously established route which continues past Kunlong southwest to Lashio, the northeast terminus of a rail line from Mandalay. The Nan-chien - Mien-ning section of the road was announced by Communist China to be open to traffic in May 1954. 33/

In addition to the routes leading to the Burma frontier, there has also been evidence of considerable Chinese road construction activity directed toward Laos and Tonkin in Indochina. Chinese defense plans in early 1953 reportedly included the construction of a motorable road from Puerh on the K'un-ming - Ta-lo route to Chen Yueh, from which alternate roads were under construction south to the border towns of Meng-p'eng and Meng-la in the latter part of 1953. About the same time, the alternates were being connected at their termini by an improved road extending along the China-Laos border. 34/ Earlier evidence indicates construction south of

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Meng-p'eng to Muong Sing in northern Laos, along a fair-weather pack track which reportedly was to be made motorable. 35/ Work on the alternate extensions south of Chen Yüeh consisted largely of cutting down undergrowth and leveling the surface of old trails, which were widened to approximately 10 feet. 36/

Chen Yüeh is also the terminus of a path reportedly being cleared south of Chiang-ch'eng (Meng Lieh) in March 1953. At the same time, a path was opened between Chiang-ch'eng and Lai Chau, a relay base in Tonkin for Chinese food aid to the Viet Minh. 37/ Moreover, Chiang-ch'eng evidently is the terminus of another road being built south from Mo-chiang, which may be part of the route reported to be extended "from China" to Phong Saly in Laos during early 1954. 38/

Farther east in China, improvements are reported to have been completed on the road running south from Meng-tzu, a Chinese railhead on the former K'un-ming - Haiphong rail line, to Ho-k'ou, the Chinese border point opposite Lao Kay in Tonkin. 39/ This same road, approximately 11.5 feet wide and reportedly entirely hard-surfaced as of December 1953, has been used to some extent for the movement of Chinese aid to the Viet Minh in Indochina. The route apparently parallels the old railroad bed to the Tonkin border, but the information above may actually reflect construction activity in preparation for restoring the rail line which was erroneously reported as road improvement. Another road, under construction at the end of 1953, is now in use from Ko-chiu to Chin-p'ing (Chin-ho) inside the Chinese border. 40/ This new route, which provides an alternate means of access from Meng-tzu to northern Tonkin, probably extends as far south as the Chinese border town of Meng-la on the Nam Na River, where it connects with a road to Lai Chau. 41/ During the Dien Bien Phu campaign in Indochina, considerable quantities of rice were delivered to the Viet Minh from this area.

A road evidently paralleling the operating western spur of the K'un-ming - Haiphong rail line 42/ was reported under construction in April 1953 from Meng-tzu to Shih-p'ing. 43/ Apparently completed as far as Chien-shui by September of that year, this route probably is now open and usable. 44/ An eastward road extension from Yüan-chiang, open to Shih-p'ing early in 1953, connects the new route to the K'un-ming - Ta-lo road. 45/

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With the important exception of the Yunnan-Tibet road, now probably completed between Yung-p'ing and Yen-ching, 46/ other road development activity in southwest Yunnan has been directed toward interconnecting the more important towns in the area and providing connections from them to both the Burma Road and the new K'un-ming - Ta-lo highway. A new macadam road, for example, has been constructed south from Mi-tu near the Burma Road in central Yunnan to Ning-erh (Puerh) on the K'un-ming - Ta-lo route, via Ching-tung and Chen-yuan. 47/ Ning-erh also is the terminus of an alternate road recently built south from Pao-shan through Shun-ning, and Yun-hsien. 48/ Although this alternate road was reported open in the autumn of 1952, bridge construction was considered rudimentary. 49/

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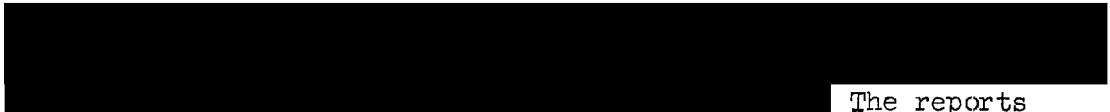
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APPENDIX B

SOURCE REFERENCES

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The reports cannot be confirmed from other sources and therefore cannot be evaluated in detail. It seems clear, however, that the reports of road construction in the frontier regions of Yunnan are sufficiently numerous to indicate that considerable activity has actually taken place. Moreover, repeated items in the Chinese Communist press proudly announcing the construction of numerous roads in Yunnan confirm, to some extent, other data and support the conclusion that road development in this area is an important objective of Chinese planning.

Evaluations, following the classification entry and designated "Eval.," have the following significance:

<u>Source of Information</u>	<u>Information</u>
Doc. - Documentary	1 - Confirmed by other sources
A - Completely reliable	2 - Probably true
B - Usually reliable	3 - Possibly true
C - Fairly reliable	4 - Doubtful
D - Not usually reliable	5 - Probably false
E - Not reliable	6 - Cannot be judged
F - Cannot be judged	

"Documentary" refers to original documents of foreign governments and organizations; copies or translations of such documents by a staff officer; or information extracted from such documents by a staff officer, all of which may carry the field evaluation "Documentary."

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Evaluations not otherwise designated are those appearing on the cited document; those designated "RR" are by the author of this report. No "FR" evaluation is given when the author agrees with the evaluation on the cited document.

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